Be My Sword

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Be My Sword

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Summary

Where Ragyo owns the world, combat determines the great, Ryuko challenges demons, and Satsuki battles her own internally.

Notes

I'm back! Hope you enjoy the first installment in this story. Be warned, explicit descriptions of sexual abuse within.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

“You’re fucking dead, you hear me?! Dead!” Ryuko snorted in amusement as she effortlessly ducked the incoming swing, her opponent’s heavy sword sticking harmlessly into the dirt. As the man strained to pull his blade from the earth, Ryuko planted a firm kick in his backside, sending him sprawling.

“Not so tough now, huh?” She grinned, hefting her own sword on her shoulder. The man’s eyes burned with fury as he sprang to his feet and retrieved his weapon. Beside the dueling pair, an elderly bearded man nodded his approval. Ryuko shot him a thumbs-up, to which he shook his head in exasperation.

“Focus, Matoi,” he said. She swung her sword over her head without breaking eye contact with the old man, parrying her foe’s incoming strike.

“I know what I’m doing.” The fiery young woman swept her legs across the ground in a wide arc, knocking the man from his feet and sending his greatsword flying from his grasp. She stood over his prone form and pressed the tip of her blade to the back of his neck before looking at the old man.

“Do it, Matoi,” he nodded. Ryuko glanced back at her fallen enemy, whose eyes bugged out with fear. She brought the point of her sword high over her head, and stabbed downwards… driving the tip deep into the dirt. The old man let out a sound of disappointment.

“I told you, Daichi, I won’t kill these men for you. I’m just in it for the practice.” She turned around and marched away without waiting for a response. Elder Daichi slowly walked over to the defeated swordsman before extricating Ryuko’s sword and plunging it into the man’s neck. Ryuko closed her eyes and quickened her pace as she heard the gurgling sounds of the man’s death.

“Fuckin’ old man,” she muttered as she left the field designated for combat. The dark-haired girl had always despised the cold-hearted, unforgiving nature of the elders of her village. She enjoyed the challenge of fulfilling trials by combat for the village’s prisoners, but refused to kill them, despite the punishment it entailed.

They haven’t done me any wrong, she had told Elder Hiroto in a previous confrontation.

They are our enemies, Matoi. They seek to crush us, and we must snuff them out first.

I will not kill for you. Leave it the fuck alone.

Do not speak like that to me, child. Know your place.

Fuck off, asshole. You bastards can’t force someone to do your bidding like that! Do it yourselves, you cowards!

Ryuko shivered as she remembered the whipping she had received for talking back to the elders then. She would likely be facing harsher punishment for her continued disobedience. The short-haired girl rubbed the back of her neck as she walked, feeling the ridges of scar tissue from previous disciplining.

Bastards. She tilted her nostrils upwards as she neared the village outskirts, a delectable scent wafting to her nostrils. Ryuko brought a hand to her stomach as it rumbled involuntarily. *Dammit, I'm hungry. I hope that's what I think it is.*

"Ryuko!" The dark-haired girl turned to the sound just in time to see the incoming body. Mankanshoku Mako crashed into Ryuko with enough force to make her stumble backwards a few steps. "Welcome home!"

"Mako," the taller girl chided, ruffling her sister's hair. "I've only been gone for a few hours!" The brown-haired girl released her grip around Ryuko's torso and took her hand.

"Yeah, but I still missed you. C'mon, Mom made croquettes for dinner today!" The older girl perked up at the mention of Sukuyo's best dish.

"What're we waitin' for?" She ran towards their house and the scent, Mako in tow. They arrived at the small house in time to see Guts chasing Mataro around the front yard.

"Mataro! Guts!" Mako called, getting the pair's attention. "What are you two doing? It's time for dinner! Did you even help Mom set the table?" Her younger brother bowed his head in shame.

"No," he mumbled under his breath.

"Guts!" The dog barked.

"C'mon then, let's go help!" She released Ryuko's hand to grab Mataro's, dragging his dead weight inside.

"But I don't wanna…" he whined futilely. Watching her sibling enter the house, Ryuko bent down to pet the family dog.

"Let's go eat, Guts," she smiled.

"Guts!" The canine barked in reply. She entered the house with Guts following close behind. As soon as she had crossed the doorway, the delicious smell of her mother's croquettes became that much stronger. *I hope I'm not drooling.*

"Ryuko! Welcome home!" The friendly greeting was accompanied by a hearty slap on the back from her father, Barazo.

"Thanks," she grinned. "I appreciate the warm welcome." Her mother, Sukuyo, placed a heaping plate of croquettes before the family as they took their seats at the table. Before the plate had even touched the wooden surface, four pairs of hands and took a grab at the food, shoveling it away as fast as it had come out.

“Oh my! Take your time everybody, there’s plenty to go around,” the older woman smiled warmly as she watched her family eat.

“Yesh Mom,” Mataro spoke around a mouthful of fried food. Barazo didn’t speak, only nodded as he stuffed another handful into his gaping maw.

“I guess I’d better get the other batch out,” Sukuyo told herself, standing and heading towards the kitchen.

“So, Ryuko, how’d the fights go today?” Barazo finally asked after swallowing.

“Not bad. I fought five today, but no one was that challenging. Elder Daichi was there. I refused to kill for him, yet again.” She tried to ignore the worried look that overtook the man’s face.

“B-but Ryuko, they’ll punish you,” he said, his brow furrowing. Sukuyo had re-entered the room and listened with equal concern.

“It’s okay. They could do worse.” Even Mako and Mataro had stopped eating, and all eyes rested on Ryuko. Sukuyo placed the plate in her hands down and rested a hand on her adoptive daughter’s shoulder.

“Ryuko, I worry about you. The elders really don’t like when you do this. It makes them look weak, when a child can stand up to them.” The younger girl felt frustration suddenly bubbling in her chest.

“I’m not a child. I can handle myself. I chose my own path, and I’ll damn sure see it through to the end!” She was shouting now, and stood up to emphasize her point. Mako placed a tentative hand on her arm.

“Ryuko-“

“No!” The taller girl shouted, pulling free from the grasp. Mako recoiled in fear. “I’m tired of being forced to question my own decisions because of the elders! They won’t-“

The sound of knuckles rapping on wood stopped her mid-sentence as all five heads plus Guts turned to the door. It swung open as if on cue to reveal a young man bearing a scroll. He unfurled it to his audience, reciting the contents from memory.

“Matoi Ryuko, you and your adoptive family are hereby summoned to the Elders’ Court for judgment of your actions. Your disobedience of a direct command from Elder Daichi has not gone unnoticed, and will be dealt with accordingly. Report to the Court immediately.” He bowed, leaving the scroll on the doorstep as he retreated from the house. For a moment, nobody moved.

“Well, we better not keep those stuck-up bastards waiting,” Ryuko said, breaking the silence. She walked out the door without waiting for her family. Mako followed closely behind, Mataro at her heels. Barazo stood slowly, placing a hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“Let’s go, dear.” She nodded wordlessly, pursing her lips as they walked out.

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The sleek black brush smoothed through Satsuki's thick hair, gently massaging her scalp as it moved. She leaned in closer to the mirror, moving stray strands behind her head in the neat style that her mother insisted on. It was a meticulous process, but well worth it if it mollified Ragyo.

Once her hair was done, it was time to get dressed. The tall girl marched across her large bedroom to the clothes her mother had selected for her, laid out neatly on her bed. She stripped off her nightgown and donned the elegant white silk dress and matching shoes. Finally dressed, Satuski returned to the mirror and quickly scanned her figure for any slight imperfections.

"Satsuki, your mother is waiting for you." The unexpected voice caused her to start. She turned towards the uninvited guest in her room and nodded curtly.

"Thank you, Hououmaru. Tell her I am on my way." The secretary bowed in response, backing out of the room. Satsuki took a deep breath as she stared at her reflection and steeled her nerves. Giving herself one last look of determination, she left the room and headed towards her mother's chambers. Errant thoughts and worries threatened to bore through her blank concentration, but she ignored them with practiced focus.

Finally, she stood before the grand double doors. They swung open before she had a chance to knock, revealing Kiryuin Ragyo herself, Ruler of the Revocs Empire. She wore a brilliant white dress that gave off a pearlescent sheen. Her multicolored hair flowed freely, and the ever-present air of authority she carried was particularly strong today.

"Ah, my dear Satsuki. Please, come in." Ragyo smiled, but her eyes betrayed dangerous potential. Satsuki had learned early in her childhood to always tread carefully around her mother. She entered the room cautiously.

"Hello mother. You wanted to see me?" Ragyo didn't respond immediately, instead gesturing for her daughter to sit on her massive bed. As Satsuki complied, the powerful woman took her hands in her own before speaking.

"As you know, we are in the middle of a great conflict." The younger woman nodded. "The Takarada Empire continues to be a thorn in my side, and they have drawn support from many of our neighboring nations. Together, they continue to carry out raids and assaults on our trade routes and cities." Satsuki nodded again.

"I know-"

"We can crush their weak, inexperienced armies on the battlefield, but too often they employ guerrilla tactics and evade our might." Ragyo continued, cutting off her daughter. The younger girl closed her mouth, deciding it was wiser not to speak.

"I have decided that an appropriate way to combat these cowards is to fight fire with fire. That is, I want to assemble a team of assassins to seek out and eliminate these guerrilla leaders.

"I have already conferred with that green-haired monkey of yours, Sanageyama. He will host a tournament and gauntlet to determine who is most suitable for this task. I want you to oversee the event and choose this team for me." She leaned in towards Satsuki as she finished speaking, still not releasing her hands.

"Yes mother. I will finalize the terms of the tournament with Sanageyama tonight." The shorter girl refused to let her discomfort show. *Don't let her see any weakness.*

"You'd better get to work on it soon," Ragyo grinned, placing a hand on her daughter's chest and pushing her backwards onto the bed. "I've already sent notices to all of the villages in the Empire, and announcements will be made in the major cities tonight. All villages will be required to send at least one champion. Don't disappoint me, Satsuki." She grabbed her daughter forcefully by her sides and lifted her upright. "You can do this for me, right?"

The dark-haired girl nodded once more, not trusting her voice. She clasped her hands tightly behind her back to stop them from trembling. She knew all too well what was coming next.

"Why don't you take those shoes off? They seem a little…uncomfortable." Satsuki sat on the bed, slipping off her shoes and handing them over to her mother, who set them off to the side. She looked her daughter up and down, grinning maliciously.

"Hmm, something still doesn't seem right. Oh dear, that dress looks to be a little tight. You should take that off too." The younger girl bit her lip, refusing to meet her mother's crimson eyes. "Come now, Satsuki. We haven't got all day." Slowly, she complied, slipping the straps from her shoulders and pulling the fabric down her sides. She stepped out of the smooth silk, and folded her hands behind her back again.

Ragyo's predatory gaze scanned every inch of her daughter's bare body. Satsuki closed her eyes, preparing for the unspeakable acts that she was never fully ready for, despite how commonplace they had become. Suddenly, a powerful grip was on her chin, and she was forced to look into her mother's bright red irises.

"Don't look away from me, child. Experience this in all its glory." She threw her daughter back on the bed, where she landed squarely on her back. The long-haired girl grit her teeth as she felt cold hands on her ankles, slowly sliding up her legs.

Don't move. Don't speak. Don't breathe. Don't-Satsuki gasped audibly as she felt an icy finger enter her without warning. Ragyo threw her head back and cackled, unfaltering in her motions. One finger became two, then three. Her other hand took the tender flesh of Satsuki's inner thigh between thumb and forefinger, pinching tightly. The younger girl winced in pain. Ragyo leaned forward until she next to her daughter's ear.

"Do you love me, Satsuki?" She whispered, her voice full of malice. Satsuki opened her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Y-yes," she hissed through clenched teeth. A strangled cry escaped her throat as Ragyo thrust further inside her.

"I couldn't understand you. You'll have to be clearer, darling," she snarled. The younger girl bit her tongue, hard. She felt tears threatening to spill forth, despite how used to this treatment she was.

Say it. Say it, and this can be over. Say it! Say it!

"I-I…I love you." Ragyo withdrew with a flourish, holding her glistening fingers up to the light. She chuckled once more as she looked at her daughter's prone form.

"Let's speak up a little next time, hm? Clean yourself up. I expect you in the great hall in ten minutes." The authoritarian woman turned around and left the room without waiting for any acknowledgement. Alone in the room, Satsuki stood up, her senses dulled. She quickly dressed herself and headed back to her own quarters to freshen up.

It could be worse. She stared into her mirror for some time, still numb. *It could always be worse if you fought back.* Satsuki repeated the phrase over and over in her head. *It could always be worse.* The tickling sensation of a lone tear spilling down her narrow cheekbones was the only thing she could feel.

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"Matoi Ryuko, daughter of Mankanshoku Barazo, formerly of Matoi Isshin." Ryuko scowled at the use of a name she had tried not to think about for some time. "We hold you in contempt of the village, and the Elders who are concerned only with its safety." Elder Hiroto's deep, commanding voice rang out, rebounding off the walls of the court hall.

"We, the Council of Elders, have unanimously agreed on your guilt in the matter." Elder Kazuki's sightless, clouded eyes seemed to bore through Ryuko's head. She squeezed her eyes shut. *Fuck. More fucking whipping-*

"However, we have decided to impose a different punishment this time." The young woman raised her head questioningly. Elder Daichi pulled a scroll from one of his robe's long sleeves. Even from a distance, Ryuko could make out the seal of the Empress.

"A notice from the capital," he said, unrolling the parchment. "Our great leadership is holding a tournament of sorts, intended to 'select the greatest combatants in the land.' It will be hosted and run by Master of Games Sanageyama Uzu, and Princess Kiryuin Satsuki herself." Excitement bubbled in Ryuko's chest. *No way.*

"We are required to send one champion to this event. As you know, imperial events like this typically have a very low survival rate." The Elders spoke one after another seamlessly.

“That is why we have chosen you to attend this gauntlet to represent our village. You are one of our best fighters, but also expendable.” The young woman didn’t know whether it was a complement or an insult.

“Go now, Matoi Ryuko. Issue your goodbyes to your family, who you will likely never see again. You depart for the capital immediately. Head to the stables.” A cry escaped from Sukuyo as the Elders finished speaking, causing Ryuko to finally become aware of her family. Barazo’s features were solemn, and her mother’s were contorted in terror. Slowly, they each bowed to the Elders and left the courtroom.

“Ryuko. They can’t do this! Not to my daughter!” Sukuyo threw herself against Ryuko, enveloping her in a firm hug. Mako reached over to take her sister’s hand, similar despair evident in her expression.

“Mom, I have to go. The Elders commanded it.”

“No! They can find someone else! What about Kenshi? He’s a good swordsman!”

“Mom!” The dark-haired girl’s fierce tone caused her family to stop walking and face her. “Dad. Mako. Mataro. Guts. I *have* to do this. Not just for the Elders, not just for the village. For me. I can’t go on living here forever, fighting half-assed battles against starving prisoners! I need a real challenge. I can do this. I will return, someday.”

“Ryuko,” Sukuyo spoke, struggling to keep her tone steady. “Every day, when you go out to fight, I fear you might not return. Whenever I see those men you are facing, it s-scares m-me s-s-so much-“ Her voice trailed off, and she rested her forehead on her husband’s shoulder as silent sobs racked her own.

“We love you, Ryuko. I know you have to go, but I hope you know that. I would do anything in my power to prevent this, but it is beyond my ability.” Barazo spoke in a serious tone he reserved for somber occasions.

“Y-you’d better c-come back, s-sis,” Mataro smiled weakly, small tears spilling from his eyes and cracking his façade.

“Guts!” Guts barked in agreement. Mako brought her sister in for a long hug.

“I love you, Ryuko. So, so much.” Ryuko returned the embrace.

“I know,” she whispered back. “I love you all.” Once they broke the embrace, the dark-haired girl turned to face her family one final time. “You have my word that you will see me again, alive and well. I love all of y-“ Strong hands took her by the shoulders, causing her to startle.

“Let’s go, young one.” Several large men surrounded her, leading her off to the stables. Ryuko jumped up and down to catch one last glimpse of her adoptive family.

“I love you guys,” she whispered.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Satsuki paced back and forth along the row of warriors, examining each one with equal impassiveness. Sanageyama followed closely behind her.

“See anything you like?” He asked, looking expectantly at the princess.

“No,” she replied curtly. “They’re too stiff. Something tells me-“ She lashed out suddenly, a sword materializing in her hand. It passed cleanly through the man in front of her, separating his head from his shoulders. Around her, the other men jumped back in shock. The green-haired swordsman smirked.

“Not fast enough either, it seems.” Satsuki reached down, placing the dead man’s sword atop his body.

“Not everyone can be as good as I am,” Sanageyama grinned as he waved to dismiss the assembled men. The long-haired woman turned to him, one bushy eyebrow raised.

“And how good are you without your shinai?” The smile on the man’s face quickly vanished as his hand patted his bare belt. Satsuki held the bamboo sword up to him before throwing the pilfered weapon at his feet. “Pay more attention. Your hubris is going to get you killed someday.” She turned to leave the courtyard as he sulked behind her. She swung open the doors of the palace and nodded at the blue-haired Chief Intelligence Officer and towering Captain of the Royal Guard who conversed in the entryway. They turned to their princess, the former bowing and the latter dropping to one knee.

“Welcome, Lady Satsuki,” Gamagoori Ira spoke reverently. “Did any of Kyoto’s chosen combatants show promise?” Satsuki shook her head.

“Most of the men they sent me were only children, younger than twenty-five. Moderately inexperienced at best. I doubt they’ll survive the first round of the fighting.”

“But, aren’t *you* younger than twe-“ A sharp glance from the princess stopped him mid-sentence.

“Watch yourself, Sanageyama.” Satsuki’s eyes glinted dangerously. “Your tongue is as much a danger to your health as your pride.” The green-haired man scratched the back of his head nervously as he looked at Gamagoori, who shot him a scornful glare.

“Is there anyone left of promise? We’ve already seen most of the large cities’ pitiful offerings. And I seriously doubt anyone from a small village will amount to anything.” Her hopes dwindling, the princess wondered how far her mother would take her punishment this time. “I may just as well form the squad from you three and Nonon.”

“Several small towns near the eastern woods sent their warriors, and they should be here today,” Inumuta Houka spoke for the first time. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up, however. My apologies, Princess.” Satsuki felt an emotion she couldn’t quite place closing in on her chest. *Worry? Fear?*

“If anyone sends for me, inform them that I will be in my chambers.” The three men bowed as their princess walked away. Sanageyama turned to the others.

“She seems worried.”

“There’s still hope, however little there may be,” Inumuta said.

“Lady Satsuki will not settle for mediocre assassins! Let me, her impenetrable shield, defend her in her time of need!” Gamagoori shouted loud enough to rattle the window frames.

“Calm down, Toad.” The green-haired swordsman winced, covering his ears. “We’ll just test the next bunch who comes in to make sure they’re up to par.”

“When you ‘tested’ Kanazawa’s chosen, the servants were scrubbing blood from the stones for hours,” Inumuta pointed out. Sanageyama chuckled.

“Where’s the fun in a bloodless fight? Besides, I’m a bit bored. It’ll be fun! You guys can come watch me kick ass.”

“I have…better things to do,” Gamagoori huffed, folding his arms.

“Have fun with that,” Inumuta said. “I’d rather not ruin *my* coat with the blood of *your* victims.”

“Suit yourselves. I’m gonna go meet ‘em.” Sanageyama drew his bamboo blade, stabbing and slicing at an imaginary opponent as he left the palace. The other men stood by idly, shaking their heads.

“Fool."

“Monkey.”

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“Here we are. Time for you to get off.” The large man spoke gruffly before shoving Ryuko off his horse. She hit the ground with a thud, narrowly missing an old woman as she scurried past. Shouts of “Hey, watch it!” and “Move it!” came from crowds that moved along the busy marketplace.

“Oof! Hey assho-“ Her indignant cries were cut off as the man threw her sword and bedroll at her. An imperial guard noticed the commotion and made his way over.

“Hey! What’s all this commotion about?”

“Just a messenger from a small village,” the horseman replied. “I’m dropping off our village’s chosen warrior for the tournament.”

“Her?” The guard scoffed, gesturing at Ryuko. “I doubt she can even lift that sword.” In a flash, Ryuko was on her feet, the blade of her sword at the guard’s throat. The horseman, sensing danger, quickly rode away.

“What was that? You doubt what?” The guard sprang backwards, drawing his own weapon.

“You dare to threaten an imperial guard?! I-“ The dark-haired girl rushed her opponent. She swung her sword once, and the man’s blade was sent clanging against the cobblestones. Ryuko stood over her defeated foe and pointed her sword at his neck. *Huh. Reminds me of when Elder Daichi-*

“What’s going on over here?” Ryuko turned, coming face-to-face with a peculiar-looking man. He stood slightly taller than her, and wore a long white jacket with a high metal collar. A bamboo shinai was sheathed at his metal belt, which held up white pants and matching shoes. His spiky green hair stood out in stark contrast from the white of his uniform, and matched his eyes. “Beatin’ up my guards, huh?”

“You should teach your guards how to guard better,” Ryuko answered, assuming a fighting stance. The man raised an eyebrow, his interest clearly piqued.

“Who are you, young lady?”

“You first.”

“You don’t know who I am?”

“Can’t say I do.” The man’s face began to turn red as his frustration grew.

“I am Sanageyama Uzu of the Princess’s Elite Four! Even a common girl like you must have heard of me. Master swordsman and Master of Games here at the capital! I-“

“I don’t live in the capital. I’m here to fight in the tournament. Although, now that you mention it, I think I have heard of you. You’re running this shit, right? I must admit, I expected someone taller. And more handsome.” Sanageyama drew his shinai, fuming.

“Disrespectful little-! Are you that eager to die?” Ryuko raised her sword to point at the green-haired man in response.

“Try me. If I kill you, do I win the tournament by default?” She smirked as he grit his teeth.

“When I beat you, I’m going to let Nonon torture you for days, you piece of-“ He was interrupted by a sword strike to the face that he parried with his bamboo sword just in time. Growling angrily, he dodged Ryuko’s next attack and smacked her squarely in the back of the leg with his shinai. She sprang backwards, swinging at his neck, and he ducked just in time to avoid the blow, losing a strand of hair in the process. The two fighters separated, catching their breath.

“Lucky hit, bastard.” Ryuko was grinning as she spoke, excited at the prospect of a challenging fight.

“You’ll have to try harder than that,” Sanageyama laughed, equally eager to duel. Ryuko spun her sword in her hand as he charged in for a counterattack. The green-haired swordsman telegraphed her next strike and slid past it, planting the point of his weapon in her chest as he sprang past her.

“I guess you’re all talk, huh-“ His taunt was cut off by a sharp pain in his right calf. He instinctively spun his bamboo sword down, knocking away the blade that had sliced his leg. He reached down to touch the wound, which was already starting to bleed.

“You got careless,” Ryuko said matter-of-factly, coughing as she held her chest where she had been struck.

“And you don’t know how to use that sword,” Sanageyama replied, readying himself for another assault. Ryuko walked forward more cautiously this time as her opponent jumped into the air, and swords clashed.

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SMASH! The sound of glass shards clattering against each other rang in Satsuki’s ears as her thrown hairbrush bounced back, landing at her feet. She rested her arms on her desk, burying her head in them.

“What do I do?” She spoke to the empty room. Already, several villagers had arrived for inspection and the tournament, and what little hope remained inside her was dashed against the cold stones of the courtyard.

Ragyo hated failure and despised weakness. Telling her there were no suitable warriors was out of the question, and presenting a subpar team was almost as bad. Either way, a torrent of physical and emotional abuse was likely in her near future.

Satsuki clenched her fists before pounding them against the desk surface, momentarily forgetting the presence of shattered glass. The sudden, acute pain in her hands grabbed her attention, and she stared at her bleeding palms for what seemed like an eternity before going to clean them off.

As the princess rubbed her hands in the water basin, meticulously picking out tiny pieces of glass, she glanced up to peer out the window. She looked back at her hands, then back out the window in surprise. *What happened to-*

Even from a distance, she could spot Sanageyama’s emerald hair and starch white uniform. What were unusual were the bright red stains on his face, chest, and legs, and the slight limp he walked with. Behind him followed two imperial guards surrounding a prisoner. Satsuki couldn’t make out much of the prisoner from where they stood behind the guards, but she noticed a head of messy black hair with a streak of red through it at the front. Her mind racing with questions and possibilities, she quickly dried her hands and left the room, not bothering to bandage the cuts.

By the time she made it through the palace halls and had arrived in the courtyard, the rest of the Elite Four were already there. The guards held the prisoner upright as Nonon scrutinized her. Sanageyama stood nearby with a look of regret on his features as a servant stripped him of his uniform coat and dressed the battle wounds on his chest. Inumuta conversed with Gamagoori, the latter dropping to a knee as soon as he had spotted the princess. The rest of the Four turned and followed suit.

“At ease,” Satsuki waved a hand dismissively. Gamagoori stared at her hand curiously, before a look of shock overtook his face.

“Lady Satsuki! You are bleeding! What happened to-“ Satsuki looked down at her hands, which had begun to bleed anew. *Shit. Forgot to bandage.*

“It’s fine, Ira. What’s going on here?” She gestured at the prisoner, finally getting a good look at him-no, her. It was a young woman, seemingly around Satsuki’s age. She had messy black hair, highlighted by a red streak in the front. Her brilliant cerulean eyes gazed at the Four and Satsuki defiantly. She sported several nasty looking bruises on the back of her neck, her chest, and hands. *No doubt Uzu’s doing.*

“Who th’ fuck are you?” The mysterious girl’s blunt comment earned her a smack across the cheek from Nonon. The captured woman scowled at the diminutive girl before looking back at Satsuki. “Fucking bitch! I said-“ The Master of Music and Theatrics interrupted her with a punch to the gut.

“Nonon,” the princess said. “That’s enough.” Nonon shot a death glare at the prisoner once more before backing off. The prisoner spit blood at the pink-haired woman’s feet as she retreated, earning her another deadly look. Satsuki faced the girl and looked her up and down before speaking.

“I am Kiryuin Satsuki, Princess to the Revocs Empire. What is your name?” The girl’s eyes widened in surprise. She coughed several times before speaking.

“Matoi Ryuko, at your service, Princess.” Ryuko spoke sarcastically, attempting to bow, but the guard on her left took it as an attempt to escape and delivered a sudden knee to the girl’s stomach. She doubled over on the floor, trying to regain her breath. “S-some warm w-welcome.” The guard scoffed in reply.

Suddenly, Ryuko shot up and drew the guard’s dagger from its sheath, embedding it in the leg of the guard to her right. He fell over, clutching his thigh in pain. As the man who had attacked her got over his initial shock, he looked down in time to see his comrade’s sword slide through his shoulder. The man gasped weakly before collapsing. Ryuko bent down, drawing the fallen man’s sword and turning to face Satsuki.

“I came here to fight in your tournament, Kiryuin,” she said firmly. “Not to be harassed by your half-assed-“ Sensing movement, the short-haired girl shot her sword up to guard just in time. Satsuki stared impassively at the two crossed blades for a moment before pulling her weapon back. Ryuko blinked, frustration quickly overtaking her confusion. “Oi, Kiryu-“

She deftly bent backwards, avoiding the princess's next thrust by centimeters, her bruised legs aching from the strain. Fighting instinct taking over, she slapped her opponent's sword away with her own and readied her stance. Satsuki's face remained stoic, her own stance betraying nothing. *She knows what she's doing,* Ryuko observed.

"Are you going to let me talk now, or jus-" A blinding flash of metal blurred across the shorter girl's vision before she hit the ground, the guard's sword flying from her grasp. The contusions on her back cried out in protest as she coughed and tried to sit up. Suddenly, a black sword blade was in her face and Satsuki stood over her, no trace of emotion on her features. The sensation of warm liquid on her arm broke her focus on the weapon angled at her head. Looking up, she noticed for the first time that Satsuki's lacerated hands were bleeding steadily, the crimson dripping slowly on her own appendages.

I didn't hit her at all, did I? The princess clearly noticed her own injuries, and withdrew the sword. She held out her hand to Inumuta, who passed her a convenient handkerchief. As she carefully wiped the blood from her hands, she turned back to Ryuko.

"Get up." The girl with the red streak obeyed cautiously, wincing as she rose to her feet.

"Well, Kiryuin? Are you gonna kill me or-"

"You will address me Her Highness, Princess Satsuki," she interrupted, ignoring the look of annoyance on Ryuko's face. "You will fight in the first round of the tournament first thing tomorrow morning. Be ready when I send for you." She turned to Gamagoori. "Escort Matoi to a tavern in the square." The large man bowed.

"Hey, we're not done y-"

"Yes, we are. Leave us."

"No, we're not. You keep interrupting me." Satsuki sighed, exasperated.

"Ira, please escort her out." Ryuko made a rude gesture as Gamagoori nodded at the command and placed a firm grip on Ryuko's arm. The shorter girl, realizing it was pointless to resist his strength, instead went limp. The blonde captain groaned angrily before hefting the girl in a fireman's carry and walking off. Satsuki watched them leave before turning to the remaining three. She let the slightest bit of hope blossom in her chest as Ryuko left.

"Inumuta, get more servants for the injured men." The blue-haired officer saluted, beginning to walk away before hesitating.

"…and your wounds, Princess?" He shot her a look.

"I'm fine. Go now." The short-haired man left without further query. Nonon stared at her friend's hands worriedly.

"Hey, Satsuki. You really should get those looked at, or at least bandaged up."

"Yes, I can take care of it myself." The pink-haired girl gave her an unsure look.

“Fine.” After deliberating for a moment, she decided to address something that bothered her. “Why’d you let that little bitch get away? She attacked the Monkey-and kicked his ass-and then tried to fight you! You should’ve killed her then and there!”

Satsuki paused, her eyes turning to the sky as she pondered the question. Nonon was right; she should’ve executed the girl with the red streak for leveling at weapon at her. *So…why didn’t I?* There was something very intriguing about this Matoi Ryuko. Somehow, Satsuki knew she might be the only hope at a half-decent warrior in the whole competition. She certainly had training to do, however. *And that’s if she survives the tournament.*

“-um, Satsuki? You there?” The tall princess looked down at her Master of Theatre.

“Yes. My apologies. I seem to have spaced out. What were you saying?”

“Er-nevermind. It doesn’t matter.” Nonon looked away and folded her arms. She’d be lying if she said Satsuki’s distracted state didn’t worry her. In all the years she’d known the princess, Satsuki had never completely forgotten about serious wounds like the ones that crisscrossed across her palms. She decided not to think too hard about it.

“So, Monkey…” She slowly turned to Sanageyama, a mischievous grin on her face. “How’d you get so beat up?” A peeved expression made its way onto the green-haired man’s face as he waved his hand to shoo the servant away, who quickly went to treating one of the injured guards.

“I…wasn’t concentrating. I got distracted by the-um-the red in her hair. That’s so unnatural, you know? I’ve never seen anything like it-“

“She really did a number on you, huh? I haven’t seen you cut up like that since you dueled Satsu-Ow!” The short girl recoiled as Sanageyama flicked her temple.

“Little snake,” he hissed. Satsuki hummed thoughtfully.

“So she beat you.” She spoke quietly. The green-haired man’s face turned a deep red.

“Well…not exactly...” He trailed off as Satsuki looked at him quizzically. “I fought her to a near-standstill, then she got a lucky swipe in.“ He gestured to the gash across his chest. “It stunned me, but, I recovered and was going in for the kill when several guards came out of nowhere to back me up and subdued her. I would’ve had her too.” The long-haired woman shook her head.

“I believe I warned you about your ego getting in your way,” she said. He bowed his head in shame.

“I’ll train harder next time.” He walked away, head still down. Nonon watched him leave and stuck her tongue out.

“I could’ve kicked her ass. You’ll let the four of us fight in the tournament, right?” The master musician glanced expectantly at her princess. The taller woman thought for a moment before nodding decisively.

“Yes, eventually. But you might be surprised. That girl is faster than even I expected. Defeating her may not be an easy task for you, as confident as you may be.” Nonon scoffed.

“You’ll see, Satsuki.” She cackled to herself as she walked away. “Just you wait, Matoi. I’m coming for you.” The taller woman watched as she retreated before heading to her own chamber.

“How interesting,” she spoke to no one in particular. Perhaps there was some hope after all. Ryuko definitely showed potential. Her apparent defiance would likely prove bothersome. However, there was something else about her that she couldn’t quite place. It was unsettling, but…maybe not in a bad way. It certainly wasn’t an unpleasant feeling-

The sensation of blood dripping on her shoes pierced Satsuki’s thoughts, and she quickly set off to her room to dress her wounds. *Well met, Matoi.*

***

The short innkeeper looked up in shock at the huge man in her doorway, her surprise only growing as he stooped down to dump another person off of his back on a wooden bench. He threw her sword down next to her before sitting on a chair in the corner.

“C-can I help you, M-Mister C-Captain?” She spoke tentatively, unsure of how to address the Elite Four member. He ran a hand through his blonde hair, muttering softly.

“Gamagoori is fine, ma’am.” The innkeeper bowed her acknowledgement. The Captain of the Royal Guard nodded back before continuing. “Would you be able to accommodate this young woman for the night? She is here to fight in the tournament…and it seems Lady Satsuki is willing to pay for her lodging for tonight. Please send the bill to the palace.”

“That’s very kind of her-“ The older woman stopped as she noticed the look of annoyance on the hulking man’s face. “Pardon me, sir! I did not mean to-“

“No, it’s quite alright. It is my mistress who frustrates me, in fact. This-this-woman attacks her, and yet she chooses to-“ He trailed off and sighed. “It is not my place to judge her actions. My apologies. Please, tell me personally if this one gives you any trouble. Have a good night.” The elderly innkeeper waved as Gamagoori backed out silently, leaving Ryuko on the floor.

“Would you like me to show you to your room?” Ryuko opened her eyes to look at the old woman.

“Y-yeah. That’d be-“ She winced as she tried to sit up, aching pain rippling through her bruised, sore body. “T-that’d b-be great.” The innkeeper rushed to her side, laying her back down on the wooden bench she rested on.

“Oh my! Don’t try to get up, dear. Let me get something to treat your bruises with! Please, wait here.” Ryuko tried to protest, but tiredness seized her and she lay her head back down.

What a fucking day. Not only had she taken on one of the Empire's most skilled swordsmen in single combat, she had dueled the Imperial Princess herself! Ryuko realized that the stories of Satsuki's combat prowess were no exaggeration. *She's infuriatingly calm and stern too. And maybe just a little pretty. Wait, wh-*

"I'm back! Are you holding up alright?" Ryuko sputtered as she tried to speak, flustered by her own thoughts.

"Yeah! I'm good! Totally fine! How 'bout you?" The old woman raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She set down a basin of warm water and several cloth bandages before moving to remove Ryuko's shirt. The younger girl raised her arms to help, her sides burning in protest. As the kind innkeeper began washing the scrapes on her stomach, the messy-haired girl spoke.

"What do you know about the Princess?" The room was silent for a moment, the sound of the wet rag rubbing against skin the only sound filling the empty space. Finally, the old woman began to talk.

"Well, when my husband and I moved to the capital over a decade ago, the Princess was very young. She was the pride of the kingdom, and although we commoners were unable to see her, many traveling lords and ladies spoke of her beauty surprising intelligence for her age. Her mother, however, supposedly never spoke highly of her in the manner that her contemporaries did. She's grown up since then, and now the kingdoms that surround our empire talk amongst themselves about who will cement their alliance with us. Princess Satsuki is of age to marry, after all." Ryuko listened intently, letting the information sink in. Suddenly, questions began popping up in her head.

"No one ever talks about the Emperor. What happened to him, anyway? Isn't he dead? It seems like the Empress runs everything." The innkeeper chuckled.

"She does, my dear. The Emperor, even when he was alive, tended to operate in the background. Empress Kiryuin Ragyo already had assumed control of the military, and he essentially had become a figurehead. His passion was rumored to be his studies anyway, which is why the public saw so little of him.

"Despite public appearance, he and his wife quarreled on occasion. Those close to the palace attest that the war between Heaven and Hell pales in comparison to their fights, even if it was mainly Ragyo on the offensive. They had a particularly bad conflict several years back. Then, one day, the Emperor was traveling back home from a meeting with some lords when bandits allegedly attacked him. He perished in the assault. But there are those who know a different story. It wasn't bandits who killed our Emperor." Ryuko sat up suddenly, despite her injuries and the ensuing pain.

"It wasn't? I've never heard-"

"Yes, most people have never even heard of the idea. However, if you know who to ask, you can learn a great many things. It is not my place to talk about these things, unfortunately." Ryuko frowned in disappointment.

“But can’t you-“

“Looks like I’m done here,” the old woman said suddenly, slapping on the final bandage. The red-streaked warrior looked down at herself and the overlapping bandages that were surprisingly well-applied. “Would you like to see your room now?”

“Sure,” she replied. “Thanks for, uh, patching me up.” The innkeeper smiled kindly.

“Anytime, my dear.” Ryuko followed her as she left the main chamber, grabbing her shirt and sword on the way out. The grey-haired woman led her into a small yet cozy room with a sizable bed and dresser. Thin slivers of moonlight shone through the slender window. “Just come out to the main hall if you need anything.” The younger girl nodded her thanks as the innkeeper left.

Ryuko quickly stripped off her clothes and threw them on the dresser along with her blade. She crawled into the bed, sighing as the large blanket enveloped her with soothing warmth. The bed itself was much larger than the small bedroll she slept on at home, and she welcomed the extra space. However, thinking about home made her think about the Mankanshokus.

Fuck. I miss ‘em already. Maybe if I win this thing they can come to the capital and live here or something. Maybe I can become a sellsword to make some money. Maybe-Ryuko yawned, sleep fast encroaching. She shut her eyes and nestled into her bed. Her thoughts became muddled as drowsiness clouded her mind. *Maybe the Princess and I can*-She was unable to finish her thought as she succumbed to the clutches of slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked the new chapter! Some heavy exposition near the end, but we couldn't have a story otherwise, no?

End Notes

I hope to be working on this more regularly than in times past. The best laid plans of mice and men, however...

Still, thanks to those of you who have stuck with me for your support and good wishes. It really does mean a lot.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!